

Leonard Maddux Putnam Veteran Reflects on Service

Putnam Co., TN

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Leonard Maddux was 16 years old and working on the family farm when Japanese war planes bombed Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941. "That was a scary time for this country," Maddux said, reminiscing this week from his Cookeville home.



Maddux is one of the oldest veterans in Putnam County, having turned 96 this year, and one of the few still alive who served in World War II.

(Pictured: Putnam County Veteran Leonard Maddux looks over pictures from his time in the service)

At his father's urging, he continued helping out on the farm after Pearl Harbor, but at the age

of 19, he decided that he had to join the military.

"Dad needed me to stay on because we had a great big farm, and he just couldn't have handled it by himself," Maddux said. "He started to go to the board to get me deferred another year, and I asked him not to."

Why?

"I said, 'Just look around,'" Maddux told his father. "All over the country, (men of) my age are all gone. So we decided the thing for me to do was to go ahead (and serve)."

Maddux joined the navy, training in Richmond, Virginia, before shipping out to the South Pacific in 1945 on a French cruise liner that had been converted to a troop ship.

"The harbor was full of ships," he said of his tropical island anchorage. "They were going to invade Tokyo if (the Japanese) didn't give up. The night before it actually happened, the news came through and all of the lights of every ship in the United States Navy, it looked like, went black. Total blackness, but it was an error because the (surrender) hadn't been signed. But they did the next morning."

Maddux was then assigned to escort six Marines to the island of Peliliu, but says his captain didn't tell him what to do after that.

“If I’d have been right smart, I would’ve caught me a flight back to the states right there,” he jokes.

Instead, he spent the next several months working in the radio shack on the island before arriving back in San Francisco where a strike by railroad workers canceled a planned train trip to Chicago.

“They let us sleep on the train that night, but the next morning we had to get off,” Maddux said. “So I looked at this guy and said, ‘you ever hitchhiked any?’ He said ‘no, did you?’ I said, ‘no but I’m fixing to.’”

He made it to the Windy City and eventually to Baltimore, Maryland to see a “girlfriend” he had met while in training.

With the war over, he came back home to attend a training school for veterans that Harry Upperman was overseeing in Baxter.

“I worked in the office,” he said. “I was there when I got the call to come back in the service. Dr. Upperman called the Navy and said) ‘we just can’t do without this man.’ And he got a letter back that said if he’s that important, we need him worse than you do.”

With the U.S. now involved in the Korean conflict, the military needed personnel who could help code and decode cryptographic messages. They sent Maddux to England to do that work and it was while in London that he had yet another brush with history, as King George VI passed away.

“I got my picture in the New York Times, viewing the king’s body,” he said.

When the second hitch was up, Maddux returned to his hometown to pursue civilian endeavors, but he doesn’t forget the sacrifice of those who died in defense of the country.

“I was real, real lucky,” he said. “Two wars, and I never got a scratch.”

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